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This is happening in real time.

But when is this?

This is happening in two times, and they are both real.

In the time that doesn't exist anymore, I am laying out these words before me

each one at a time
finishing each one before the other.

And then in this time that is happening now, *your* now.

You are waiting to get to the end of these words

time at one each
other the before one each finishing.

These words reach backward, trying to capture what has happened over the course of a *today* that is slipping away, in which Graeme Miller and John Smith have made a work of art called *Beside the A Side*. And these words reach forward, moving delicately through time, to the page you feel in your hands.

In my private time, it is taking me some time to put these words down

and now I am taking exactly *this* much of your time .

Thank you.

. . .

Let me rewind the tape.

It is Wednesday. I am sitting at a table opposite Graeme Miller.

There has been a brief pause,

and then Graeme Miller has pressed play on his thoughts and they are coming out, one after the other, a continuous stream.

He is telling me about the acquired skills of hunting for lost tape, like being a trapper or a hunter, learning where magnetic tape lingers, where it finds refuge, where it is discarded and where it collects itself. Glinting in the corner of the eye, caught between cracks in the concrete, wrapping itself around trees and signposts and anything that stays still for more than a little while. He is telling me about the excitement of discovery, about the great gift of mystery that the found tape presents, those delicious moments before it has been respooled onto a cartridge and when it still could be anything: songs from another culture, the secrets to getting rich quick, a letter-by-tape to a distant family member, the secrets of the universe or the private thoughts of someone about whom we'll never know anything more. He is telling me about little narratives: someone is driving. they are stuck in traffic. and while they are stuck, their tape jams in their car stereo. they're stuck in traffic, and they're going to be late, and now the tape has jammed too. and it's just not playing, or it's warbling out of pitch, or it's constantly jumping back and forth on auto-reverse, first the A side, then the B side. and there's nothing the driver can do about it, until they get to a traffic light, or until they're waiting on a slip ramp, and then they roll down the window, grab the tape with their free hand, and hurl that goddamned tape out the window. at least they can do that much.

and then, years later, maybe decades later, Graeme Miller comes hunting along the slip road, cars speeding by him, breathing carbon monoxide all morning, and he finds them, one after the other, all huddled there.

And now he is telling me about the biology of the tape, the way it wiggles and clings like a living thing, the way the city acts upon its ferrous oxide or chrome oxide particles and breaks them down, makes them something new. The way the city fucks them up. The tape is memory and thought and experience and history all in a very material form: iron filings on sella tape, arranged once through its close proximity to an electromagnet, and then rearranged again by time and friction and sunlight and rain and temperature. It is purely melancholic, says Graeme Miller.

But Graeme is talking about the last time that he and John Smith undertook a project like this, a decade ago, when cassette tapes were already fighting, and losing, against CDs and voicemail, let alone against ipods and cell phones and skype and youtube. What if? What if we don't find anything? Then there will be a blank screen, a silent room, an imaginary tape.

. . .

Fast forward.

It's Thursday night. For me, this is 'last night'. For you, it is one of any number of indistinct nights in April 2010. I am trying to go to sleep early, trying to ready myself for a long day ahead. I have prepared my walking shoes, and a water bottle, and an apple for emergencies. We will start at Siobhan Davies Studios SE1, Graeme has told me, and then work in an outward spiral until we find a fragment of magnetic audio tape. Graeme and John will set up a static camera shot and film the tape wherever it is: wrapped around a drain, tangled in a tree branch, drifting down the pavement. Then they will take the tape back to their studio and carefully extract whatever audio recording remains on each 'side' of the fragment of tape. This audio will form the soundtrack for the film installation they will construct in which the film of the tape in its found environment is projected onto both sides of a suspended screen – one side as the original film, the other as its mirror image. The length of the film is determined by the length of the fragment. The audio is on a continuous loop, from A-side to B-side and back again; each time the audio switches, the two sides of the film (normal and mirrored) are also flipped.

I am trying to get to sleep, but I keep wondering about where we will find the tape. Maybe it will be somewhere in Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre. Maybe down one of the stretches of the Old Kent Road. Maybe somewhere I've never heard of. I am trying to get some sleep, but I am imagining myself in a precarious scenario. Climbing up into a tower block to investigate something glittering from a railing. Stepping my way through broken glass behind an abandoned shop. Lying on my stomach in a traffic island, cars and fumes swirling around me. Or grabbing, exhausted, at flapping and frayed ends of plastic, only to have the delicate magnetic coating come off as dust on my fingertips.

Friday morning. (*This morning.*) I am waiting inside the studio when I see Graeme and John arrive. I come outside. And the hunt is already over. Before it began, it's already over.

There is tape hanging from the branches above the gate to Siobhan Davies Studios. Go look. There might still be some there.

This is what happens when you work with chance.

Suddenly we're all three wide awake. They want to make the most of the low morning light before it moves past the building. They want to make the most of the still-quiet day, the shifts between the traffic whirring by and the quiet snatches of birdsong, the quality of air and presence, the rare good fortune of two beautiful English days in a row. I am thinking of Wonderland, of Oz: 'If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard.'

This is what happens when you work with chance.

And this is what happens when you work with deliberate composition. When you work with careful, painstaking exhaustive attention to detail.

The arrangement of the ladder. The clamping of the camera. The framing of the shot. The timing of the record period. Waiting for the wind to make the tape dance. Waiting for a pedestrian to pass; waiting for a bus; waiting for the light.

Chance is something we wait for.

This is what happens when the chance comes. This is what happens in the real time of filming:

Move the ladder.	Adjust the camera.	Look at the tape.
Place the clamp.	Tighten the clamp.	Climb up the ladder.
Turn the clamp.	Look at the sun.	Put on the headphones.
Loosen the clamp.	Wait for pedestrians.	Wait for pedestrians.
Move it to another spot.	Look at the road.	Climb down the ladder.
Tighten the clamp.	Climb up the ladder.	Shake the branch so the tape flaps freely.
Adjust the camera.	Adjust the camera.	Plug in the headphones.
Look at the sun.	Look through the frame.	Loosen the clamp.
Look at the frame.	Plug in the mic lead.	Adjust the camera.
Move the camera.	Climb down the ladders.	Look through the viewfinder.
Climb down the ladder.	Place the hands on the hips.	Tighten the clamp.
Loosen the clamp.	Cup the hands against the sun.	Pick up the microphone.
Tighten the clamp.		
Move the ladder.	Look at the traffic.	Press record.

And wait.

. . .

. . .

. . .

Graeme and John are a team of two, learning to look, learning to listen. Learning from the tape. Learning from the passers-by. What kind of place is this? What kind of dance happens here? What is there to see if you only stop to look? What is there to hear if you take the time to listen?

I close my eyes. I hear:

a motorcycle

a heavy lorry

an alarm signal

an airbrake releasing

high heels on the pavement

a drill working its way into concrete

a man who says 'I'll honour my side of the agreement but you honour yours'

I hear:

the squeak of the gate

the flap of the tape

the break of the day

the turn of the dial

the tip of the tongue

the depth of the field

the corner of the eye

the hope in the step

the knock of the wood

the length of this time

I hear:

every so often, when the traffic is held somewhere, birdsong and whistles, music from another time, still hanging about in trees

I hear:

the erecting of scaffolding. the knocking of metal pipe against a hammer. I hear the hammer holding still and the whole world swinging upward to meet it. I hear the scaffolding staying level and the world sinking downward away from it as the scaffold grows longer.

I open my eyes.

I see:

the shadows of three men on the pavement.

the 53 via New Cross

the metallic sheer of a woman's leggings

the 12 via Oxford Circus

a tuft of old growth caught between the paving stones

the Demerstee via Leuven

This has been carefully framed and prepared: what you can hear, what you can see, and the words I use to describe them. move the ladder one foot to the left. move the ladder six inches back to the right. I change my mind and write something else. This next bit you'll never hear.

[. . .]

This is the moment full of potential. I open my eyes. I see:

The spinning wheel inside the camera. The tape going round it. I see the wheel staying still while all of this spins around it, wrapping itself tightly around the wheel, all these moments layering on top of each other. The bus, and the boy running for the bus, and the delivery van that we waited to move out of the shot, and the swaying trees, and the cyclists, and the bus stop, and the old church with the St George's cross waving, and John behind the lens, and Graeme keeping watch below, and me, writing away in my notebook. All of us, spinning around and around, whether we're in the shot or not, some trace of us has reflected off a surface onto another surface and into the shot, that blink on the bus mirror as it goes by, that spinning of the bicycle spoke. Some flashing trace of us is reflected down the lens, and onto the sensor, and encoded into digital information, and laid down in strips of ferrous metals on a spindle going round,

and round,

and round

and round.